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Mr. Obang Metho Addresses Ethiopians in Dallas, Texas

WHAT WENT WRONG THAT WE OVERCAME A FOREIGN OPPRESSOR BUT HAVE REPEATEDLY FAILED TO OVERCOME INTERNAL OPPRESSION?

“The enemy of an African is he, himself.”

--A Zulu adage--

Good afternoon! Thank you for inviting me to speak to you here in Dallas, Texas. I would like to especially thank the organizers of this important event. Here are the exhaustive list of the committee members who made that great event to happen: Seyoum Workneh, Asrat Degu, Girma Negussie, Ayalew, Sara, Hamelmal, Mengistu, Zewge, Dessalegn, Hagere, Assefa, Yossef, Wasyhun, Haile and Tesfu.

Today, along with other Ethiopians all over the world, we remember the 119th anniversary of the Battle of Adwa of 1896. At that time, Italian troops invaded Ethiopia on a conquest to colonize them. They already had control of Eritrea and Somalia and wanted to create an expanded Italian colony of East Africa.

The fact that Ethiopians were victorious over the Italians remains a source of pride that still runs deep in the hearts of many Ethiopians.

Today I would like us to think about the Ethiopian victory at Adwa, life in Ethiopia: **Post-Adwa, and what lessons we can learn from our experience—whether good or bad.** Here are some questions to start us thinking:

1. Why are you here in the United States? What brought you here?
2. When did you come? Was it since the TPLF/EPRDF came into power or before?
3. Is life better for Ethiopians in 2015? Do we have the freedom Ethiopians fought for in 1896?
4. If not, for how long did Ethiopians experience freedom following the victory at Adwa?
5. If you agree it was short-lived, why?

In other words: What went wrong that we overcame a foreign oppressor but have repeatedly failed to overcome internal oppression? Later on we will talk about what we can do to achieve a more lasting victory. As I have previously stated, for Ethiopia to move forward, we must own the truth—which includes not only celebrating the proud moments of our history and learning lessons from it, but also accepting the bad and ugly parts so we might also learn from them. This must start by talking to each other rather than about each other—a way to bring reconciliation that will lead to greater unity.

A primary factor leading to the victory at Adwa was the fact that greater unity among Ethiopians was achieved as Menelik and the people of Ethiopia came together to face a foreign enemy intent on the colonization of Ethiopia. Because unity can bring greater success, is it any surprise that inciting disunity is a trademark of the current regime? In fact, even our history is now being manipulated by the current government in order to rekindle grievances among our people. Why are we falling for it so easily? What inside us makes for such fertile ground for embracing one's own ethnic-based superiority, ethnic-based entitlement, or ethnic-based desire to dominate over other groups?

Did Ethiopians come together in 1896 to win a physical battle only to return to an internal competitive battle against their fellow Ethiopians where only one group could win? This is a recipe for continued unrest, is it not? *Why was it wrong for people of Italian ethnicity to seek to dominate others of different ethnicity if it continues to be our own intent now? Does the fact that they were a foreign intruder really make such a difference or is it wrong regardless of who they are or where they came from—including from among us? We celebrate year after year, looking backward towards a time when we Ethiopians overcame a major foreign threat, but we do not grieve for giving up the opportunity we might have had to change the course of our country. As we look back at the details of our history, it may be time to forgo some of the celebratory parts this year and focus on what went wrong.*

To start, let us take a look back in our Ethiopian and African history. During the last quarter of the 19th century, Ethiopia was one of the few remaining countries in Africa that still had not been colonized by a European power despite the valiant wars of resistance fought by Africans all over the continent. *Many horrific crimes against Africans were committed by these aggressive European powers under the name of whomever was on their throne at the time. One of the worst examples was in the Congo where Belgium rule was established under King Leopold.*

These stories spread fear to others in Africa. Colonization meant slavery, subjugation and exploitation—the lack of freedom, justice and self-determination. With it came inequality and lack of opportunity. Power was in the hands of a few. The foreign aggressors could often charm the discontented natives into siding with them as it gave these indigenous Africans opportunities otherwise denied. *Internal competition between feuding fiefdoms, ethnicities and factions was exploited among rivals as a means to divide the resistance and conquer the territory. Those resistant to colonial control were not allowed to think, speak or be educated in order to block their voice. They had no choice of who would lead them as colonialists knew such a choice was a threat to their control. Puppets were allowed some positions, but it was linked to carrying out the agenda of the colonialists.*

Some countries benefited in some ways from development, but European aggression and development was nearly always linked to the goal of exploiting the country for the benefit of the European powers back in their home countries. Colonizers were greedy for resources, power, and glory. For Italy, it may have been all three. The fact that they were defeated so soundly was a source of deep humiliation that many believe led to the later invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

Menelik II came to power in March 1889 following the death of Yohannes IV in a battle with Mahdists and during one of the most severe famines in Ethiopia's history. Two months later he signed a treaty of friendship and trade with Italy, the [Treaty of Wuchale](#), where he surrendered the northern part of Ethiopia to Italy. This region later became the Italian colony of Eritrea. In return, Menelik was assured of sovereignty over the remaining parts of Ethiopia; however, the treaty's two versions were deceptively different.

In his book, *A Guide to Ethiopia*,¹ Phillip Briggs states, *“What Menelik didn't realize was that the Italians had inserted a clause (article 17) in the Italian version of the document, but not in the Amharigna equivalent, which demanded that Ethiopia make all her foreign contacts through Italy, in effect reducing Ethiopia to an Italian protectorate.”* When it was presented at the Berlin Conference, the deception was accepted by the other members. While the Italians were still bound by the treaty to Menelik, they double-crossed him again. Briggs goes on to say, *“Italy further undermined the spirit of the treaty when, in 1891, they successfully courted several Tigrean princes into alliance with Eritrea.”* *When the princes revolted against the prospective colonizers in 1894, Italy was left with one course open to attain its goal of colonizing Ethiopia: military confrontation.”*

The Italians did not expect this kind of unification and believed they could depend on some of these rivals of the emperor to rise up against him, essentially hoping to defeat Menelik by internal division. However, in 1893, Menelik abrogated the whole of the Treaty of Wuchale. In 1895, the Tigreans instead joined forces with the emperor in order to all defend themselves from what Menelik had aptly described to be “a foreign menace.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, the Italians did not expect such a large force of united Ethiopians.

The Italians decided on a surprise attack on Adwa on Sunday, March 1, 1896 because it was a feast day in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They hoped the soldiers would be at church celebrating; however, the Ethiopians were ready for them. As a result, the Italians were greatly outnumbered.

Two additional factors contributed to the victory over the Italians. Due to rain, some within the three detachments of Italians were slowed down in their movement, causing one group to arrive before the others. Additionally, the inaccuracy of the maps used by the Italians led to a further dividing of the Italian detachments from each other. An African guide is said to have alerted them to the faultiness of their maps, but the Italians decided to trust their maps instead. When the Ethiopians attacked the first detachment, the Italians were overpowered. Among the fighters, were many Africans, including many from Eritrea, who were fighting with the Italians. When their defeat was certain, they ran, leaving the Italian officers alone. The Italian officers were then forced to surrender. Ethiopian troops then cut off the other two detachments.

This was the first time any African army had so soundly defeated the much-better equipped and militarily-educated Europeans. The defeat was so humiliating it resulted in a petition in Italy, signed by 100,000 Italians demanding an Italian withdrawal from Ethiopia. *In 1941, the Italians again tried to take control of Ethiopia, but were again defeated, leaving Ethiopia to be the only African country to remain independent at the end of the scramble for Africa in both the 19th and 20th centuries. Many believe that the Europeans were so successful overall only because they were able to gain the help of African collaborators. Fomenting internal division has greatly contributed to the suffering of Africans both then and now. In the case of the Battle of Adwa, without the unification of Ethiopian ethnic groups, the outcome could have been vastly different.* Yet, at the conclusion of the victory over colonization, the power and the privileges were left in the hands of the few. The majority of people remained in poverty; and in fact, Menelik began pushing for the expansion of Ethiopia to the south.

The victory of Adwa, which left Ethiopia remaining as the only country in Africa independent of European colonial rule, brought pride to Africans beyond its borders. The African’s positive identification with Ethiopia’s success over the colonialists became synonymous with the term, “Ethiopianism.” Ethiopia now holds a strategic role in Africa; however, how can Ethiopia use that influence for the good of the continent? The 21st century scramble for Africa is in process and it still requires the oppression of the people. As long as Ethiopia is an oppressive, corrupt and deceitful nation, its influence on the continent will be predominately negative. The colonizers now are not the Italians or other Europeans, but from within. Yes, outsiders may still be seeking resources, but they are partnering with our own people—the new colonizers. A Zulu adage says it all: *“The enemy of an African is he, himself.”*

What can we do to achieve a more lasting victory for all the people of Ethiopia and use our influence for the good of the continent and beyond?

Honestly appraisal of oneself.

More questions:

1. Do you believe the enemy of Ethiopians is he, himself; or she, herself? Why or why not?

2. Do you believe if Ethiopians came together in unity to replace the TPLF/EPRDF that we would finally achieve freedom? Why or why not?
3. What can you start doing differently today?

This is where Ethiopians have to rethink the basic assumptions about all aspects of life in Ethiopia, including its ethnic focus. Change will not come by changing the regime, but by changing the attitudes, values and practices of our society. The ethnic apartheid TPLF/EPRDF regime is a reflection of what many of us have accepted as the modus operandi over the last many years. Is it working? Do we really want a series of ethnic victories in our future or do we want a new Ethiopia that ensures freedom regardless of who is in power?

In Ethiopia over the last 119 years, governments and leaders have come and gone, but did society really change? Whether under feudalism, communism or revolutionary democracy, have the majority of Ethiopians found any justice and freedom? Has the oppression of all, but the elite few, become rooted into the fabric of our society? Add ethnicity to the mix and you find it can either open or close doors of opportunity; give or deny you justice; make you rich or rob you of the little you have; give you a future in the country or cause you to flee for your life or better opportunity. This is morally wrong.

In Adwa, they were not defending an ethnicity, a language or a region, but a country, but today, the TPLF/EPRDF is defending ethnicity and personal interest. The most vulnerable are seen as obstacles rather than as people with God-given value. Ramshackle homes of Ethiopians living in the city are being bull-dozed to make way for high-rises owned by the elite, leaving an increasing homeless population. From capital city to the rural areas, the homeless, unemployed and beggars are everywhere for we are one of the poorest countries in the world. Our people are evicted from their own land or homes, whether urban dwelling or smallholder farmers, so the elite can take it and keep striving for more.

The TPLF/EPRDF regime is talking about building a 20kilometer light rail train in Addis Ababa, which could be a good thing, but the majority of people live on so little per day that they won't be able to afford to use it. They talk about building roads, but again, the majority of Ethiopians are pedestrians because few own cars.

Much of progress is based on deception, pretending we are good in public when we fall tragically short in private. Our economic growth fills the pockets of the well-connected, but despite desire and hard work, less-favored others keep falling behind. How can we boast of never being colonized when you honestly look at what we have now? We must face the truth so can do something about it. Look at the lack of institutions, the failed rule of law, the no-choice election, the suppression of the media and we see it is all a hoax. The reality must be exposed and with it, some will be humbled; but, most of us already know. We are colonized from within, not only by the TPLF/EPRDF, for they are also victims of the false dreams we have lived for years. If we think everything will just work out without a change of heart, soul, and mind, we are being naive. If we think all it will take for a better life is to change the government, we are stuck in that stage of childhood characteristic of magical thinking rather than in facing reality.

It is time for a new victory. In 1896, Ethiopians defended what they had but once they got it, they did not cherish it and instead became embroiled in rivalries, power struggles and personal ambitions. We can do that forever and never really move from where we are at. *Where are the institutions necessary to ensure that a new government, reformative efforts and hope will hold the future leaders accountable? Because we, ourselves, are such a big part of the problem, we need institutions to hold us accountable.*

If it is to be sustainable, we must undergird changes with healing and reconciliation between people, strengthened institutions, minority rights, and the restoration of moral conscience and righteous actions that come from people who fear God, value humanity, and who care about their neighbors. Wherever moral and legal laws do not exist, the people are doomed to fail. There will be every type of dissension, robbery of the vulnerable and destructive acts towards self and neighbor. The consequences for such cannot be avoided as they come with the crime. It is the principle that no one is free until all are free. How do we, our descendents, or our nation flourish when these principles are violated? God has a perfect law that leads to freedom, when such laws are broken; it can lead to harming others, self-destruction, manmade poverty, injustice, and conflict.

For example, if power, riches, or glory cause you to ignore God's moral law, how are we different from the colonialists in their Scramble for Africans? When we try to grab it by deception, trickery, bribery or force, it has an impact. Just because one is stronger, enjoys impunity, or can get away with it in Ethiopia, does not mean the moral law and its built-in penalties do not exist. A victory for Ethiopia would be hard to contain were its people to individually follow universal God-given moral laws. Many legal systems are built on such laws and provide ways for societies to achieve greater harmony, prosperity and cooperation.

It is interesting to note that Adwa and other locations in the north are considered the birthplace of Christianity in Ethiopia; however, why is it that almost immediately, some in the TPLF Central Committee sought to obliterate faith and conscience, of both Christians and Muslims, when they came into power? Today they are trying to control the religious affairs of our religious institutions. *Is it because morality is an even greater threat than unity? A morally conscious public may just rise up from out of every region, ethnicity, city, town, woreda and kebele to say, we will not tolerate this any longer.*

[A Call to engagement by religious leaders:](#)

Religious leaders have a critical role to play in Ethiopian society that no one else can fulfill. That role is to call individuals, communities, institutions and nations to higher standards of morality, justice, compassion, righteous living and reconciliation between alienated people. This role is unique to our religious leaders, without which our society will decay or implode from the inside. The powerful will become oppressive, the weak will be exploited, the "other" or "those others" will be dehumanized and maligned, conflict will erupt—sometimes becoming violent, corruption will consume the life-blood of the people, a famine of truth, honesty and integrity will frustrate life, injustice will undergird impunity, and our social structures will collapse. Our country will lose its heart and soul and the people will suffer. Is this the Ethiopia post-Adwa?

No wonder we Ethiopians have become have become our own enemies. It may be a time to grieve for that which we have lost or never found, to wail for what has died, and to seek God's help in becoming the Ethiopia we never believed possible. Together, with our Tigrayan brothers and sisters, let us reject rebellion against our Maker and pursue a life that will bring meaning and life to ourselves and our nation.

May God help us to become people of restored souls, decolonized minds, and purpose-filled lives so we might trust, honor, and obey our Creator God and use our influence for the good of others, whoever that might be—putting humanity before ethnicity so we are all free! Thank You!

ⁱ Guide to Ethiopia, by Phillip Briggs, 2nd Edition; 1998; p. 42-43

ⁱⁱ The Horizon History of Africa; Chapter: Wars of Resistance, written by Stanlake Samkange; American Heritage Publishing, Inc, 1971; p. 422-423, Chapter: Under Colonial Rule, written by George Shepperson, 454-455
Information from these old accounts were the basis of much of the historical account of the Battle of Adwa.